

The Last Waltz Revisited

By Peter Stone Brown

When Robbie Robertson decided to disband The Band in 1976, it was time. Anyone who had seriously followed the group since their debut, *Music From Big Pink* eight years before knew it even if they didn't want to see it happen. What was easily the tightest of any rock band to set foot on a stage (before or since) rivaled only by Booker T & The MGs and James Brown's various bands, was showing signs of wear. Sometimes there were false starts, occasionally songs would fall apart, but most of all it was painfully apparent that pianist and singer Richard Manuel, couldn't keep it together on stage any more. He'd stop playing mid-song, his voice would blow out after one or two numbers and the other singers would fill in for him.

In addition to this, primary songwriter Robertson was having a hard time coming up not only with new material but new ideas. Their last album of new material *Northern Lights-Southern Cross*, as good as it was found him at times revisiting old themes, and Manuel who contributed two brilliant songs to *Big Pink* and had co-written several others had either lost his ability or desire to write.

The Band had been together with one interruption for 16 years. They started out as members of rockabilly singer Ronnie Hawkins' band The Hawks. Originally from Arkansas, Hawkins found he could make a good living in Canada, and recruited drummer Levon Helm to join him. One by one the various members joined and finally when they realized they had something on their own—in addition to being tired of Hawkins' various rules, they split and went on their own as Levon & The Hawks. At the time they had a reputation as being the best bar band in Canada.

In Toronto, they met American blues singer, John Hammond Jr., who used three members, organist Garth Hudson, Helm, and Robertson on his album *So Many Roads* (and later cut a second using Robertson and bassist Rick Danko). A few months after that, Bob Dylan recruited them to be his touring band, first doing two shows with just Robertson and Helm, with session players Al Kooper and Harvey Brooks on keyboard and bass respectively.

I saw Dylan with Levon and the Hawks in Newark, New Jersey in October 1965 (from the front row center) and it was a concert and a sound I'll never forget. A wall of Fender Showman amps were lined up across the stage. It was loud, wild and magnificent. With Dylan on rhythm guitar, Robertson, Hudson and Manuel were free to let loose on their instruments and let loose they did. Within two months, Helm quit and was eventually replaced by powerhouse drummer Mickey Jones, and Dylan and the Hawks went on their now-legendary tour of Australia and Europe. The results of that can be found on the release *Live '66* and various bootleg records.

Two months after the tour ended Dylan had his motorcycle accident (whether he did or not or how hurt he was doesn't really matter) and soon the Hawks joined him in Woodstock. Two years later The Band emerged with a sound no one had heard before and an album that changed the direction of rock music.

Somehow they'd managed to take all their influences and all the genres that contributed to rock, whether blues, country music or gospel and create something

that was new, but managed to remind you of something you'd heard before, though pinning it down was a bit more difficult. At first they were wrongly pegged as country-rock, though "Chest Fever" showed they could be as psychedelic if not more so than any band from San Francisco. To top it off, they had three distinctive, and passionate singers and they sang with energy. It may have been rock, but it wasn't kids music. It was almost music from another time with a mystical edge. And the singers, Manuel, Helm and bassist Rick Danko could take a song and pass it around among them the way the Harlem Globetrotters could pass a basketball. You were never sure who was going to sing the next line or verse.

The image The Band presented on *Big Pink* was that of 19th Century outlaws, and there was also a big picture of them with their families—a distinct slap in the face to every rebel rock band at the time. Looking at the photo and hearing the songs, it was easy to think these were clean-living country guys who went to church on Sunday. Thirty years later books started appearing that blew that image to bits. They were partying, drug-taking, drinking maniacs who regularly wrecked their cars and had a hard time keeping anything together. That doesn't really matter. The Band were and still are the greatest rock and roll band I've ever seen, and no one comes close.

One of the myth-destroying books was Levon Helm's autobiography, *This Wheel's On Fire*. In the book, Helm accuses Robertson of all kinds of crimes, from claiming he solely wrote the songs (a look at various Band albums reveals several shared songwriting credits) to destroying The Band and hanging out with "the big money boys," referring to Robertson as "Robbie" during the time they were friends, but by the end, only "Robertson." This has led to daily arguments among Band fans on the Internet that have been raging for years. Interestingly enough, interviews with Helm before his book, and also before the suicide of Richard Manuel, show no such rancor towards Robertson.

Either way, the story of what happened to The Band is one of the saddest and most tragic in all of rock and roll. Rick Danko, immensely overweight, died of a stroke in 1999 two years after he was busted for heroin in Japan. Helm, an incredible singer, lost his voice to throat cancer. Even though The Band reformed in the early '80s without Robertson, they never achieved their previous heights, ended up recording for tiny labels that could not promote them properly, and where once they had filled arenas, now played small halls, bars and dives.

So with all that in mind, I went to see the re-released *The Last Waltz*, the film of their final concert at Winterland in San Francisco in 1976. I'd seen it many times over the years, mostly on video, but walking into the theater, I couldn't help but think of the first time I saw it, probably the day it hit the theaters in 1978, with my dad, who was a pretty hip guy musically. I remembered what he said as we walked out of the theater that day: "Now that was two hours of pure entertainment!" It still is.

Robbie Robertson was well aware of how great and important The Band were, and when he knew it was over, he wanted to end it in style, and he wanted some kind of document of what The Band was about. He also wanted it to be better than any other rock concert movie, so he got the best director in Hollywood, Martin Scorsese

to film it. And film the concert he did—there are no audience shots. It is all about the music.

Robertson also invited various other musicians The Band or various members had worked with over the years. To tell the story, the film is interspersed with Scorsese interviewing mostly Robertson, but the other members of the group as well, who are mildly cooperative at best. Robertson talks over and over again about their 16 years on the road. When he says, "I couldn't live with 20 years... I couldn't even discuss it," you almost wanna hit him. The truth is they spent the first eight years on the road, the last touring the world with Dylan. Other than performing three songs with Dylan in 1968 at the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert at Carnegie Hall, they didn't begin to tour until 1969. They spent the next few years touring sporadically, but there were long periods of time when they didn't tour at all.

The interviews are also used to introduce various artists and this is where the film screws up for me. Joni Mitchell is shown, after a silly, almost sexist discussion about "the ladies." Van Morrison, because he kicked his way off-stage at this one show, is somehow linked to a discussion about Chuck Berry's duckwalk and other early rock 'n' roll moves. Anyone who's seen Van Morrison perform (though he occasionally pulls some crazy stuff) knows he's about as far from a showman as you can get. The original film and the re-release (though apparently it may be on the upcoming DVD) should have used the way Morrison was introduced at the concert itself: Richard Manuel singing "Tura Lura Lura ('An Irish Lullaby')," with Morrison walking on stage to complete the song, giving one of the greatest performances of his entire career. The truth is The Band recorded and sometimes performed with all the guests at The Last Waltz, so why not just say it, instead of loading up the movie with this bull that ultimately comes off as dishonest. Considering the varied and stellar line-up of musicians, Hawkins, Dylan, Muddy Waters, Dr. John, Neil Young, would it make them seem any less remarkable?

That aside the concert and the film had one major omission: John Hammond Jr. This was inexcusable, considering Emmylou Harris and The Staple Singers, who hadn't worked with The Band previously are shown on two sound-stage sequences.

The concert itself is where the action is and this is the reason to see the film and see it on a big screen. The focus is always on the musicians and for the most part the musicians deliver with performances so good you actually find yourself applauding. The sound of the film has been remastered and is magnificent. There are several amazing moments. Ronnie Hawkins is a riot. This was *his* band, and he's out to have a good time, shouting out "Big time, big time," as the song begins, and working each member's name into Bo Diddley's "Who Do You Love?" The original recording of "Who Do You Love?" by Hawkins is one of the great records of rock 'n' roll with one of the most amazing guitar solos in rock history by Robertson. Robertson doesn't reach quite the same heights on this version, but it's fun anyway.

For the most part The Band backs everyone up masterfully, whether Dr. John, outrageously decked out in a pink bow tie and beret, or an obviously smashed Neil Young in a t-shirt. And of course, when the Band is alone doing their own material, whether "The Night They Drove Ol' Dixie Down," "It Makes No Difference," "Chest

Fever” or “Cripple Creek,” you realize how amazing they were and what a sad night it really was that these songs would never be played this way again.

The Band was steeped in the blues and when Muddy Waters does “Mannish Boy,” it’s almost chilling. With Paul Butterfield blowing one endless note, The Band along with Water’s guitarist at the time, Bob Margolin, cranks up one nasty groove as Waters, almost regal, works himself into a near-frenzy. The two blues songs that follow, “Further On Up The Road,” with Eric Clapton, and “Mystery Train” with Paul Butterfield don’t come close.

There are two performances that don’t work. Where most of the performers picked songs that would fit The Band, Mitchell, insistent on doing current material picked “Coyote” one of her more jazz-based tunes, and no one seems to know what they’re doing. Why Mitchell didn’t pick “Raised On Robbery” which Robertson played lead guitar on is a mystery.

The one performer who never should’ve been there is Neil Diamond. As Helm says in his book, “We don’t even know who the fuck he is.” The reason Diamond was there was Robertson had just produced his album *Beautiful Noise*, getting the largest producer credit on any album cover in history. Diamond sings “Dry Your Eyes,” a totally pretentious song he wrote with Robertson. The first time I saw the movie, Diamond was excruciating, and of course on video you could fast-forward. This time for whatever reason, his leisure suit, his tinted glasses, and his obvious nervousness come off as funny.

Diamond is followed by Van Morrison and seeing it now, the thing you realize is how young Morrison looks. A perfect fit, The Band knows just what to do on Morrison’s “Caravan,” a song he wrote in Woodstock and Morrison takes things to a very high level in a truly stunning performance.

Instead of using an interview to introduce Dylan, Lawrence Ferlinghetti delivers a poem/prayer benediction (various San Francisco Beat poets read during intermission) and at first all you see is Dylan’s hat. Wearing a polka dot shirt, somehow mixing up his on the road and Woodstock period with the Band, this remains one of the greatest moments of Dylan on film. Unlike most of the other performers, perhaps with the exception of Robertson, he shows no reverence towards the group, he’s there to deliver, first with “Forever Young,” and then rocking out madly on “Baby Let Me Follow You Down.” There are a couple of great moments in this performance, once where Dylan sees and points to someone he knows in the audience, breaking into a rare smile, and the other during the transition from song to song with Danko grinning and Dylan holding the rhythm while Helm wonders just when (and maybe what) he’s going to do.

Everyone returns to the stage for “I Shall Be Released,” which remains one of my favorite scenes because the three greatest songwriters of the time, Dylan, Morrison and Robertson are all sharing one microphone.

Seeing the film now, it’s hard not to keep an eye out for little clues of disharmony, but the performances make you forget that stuff. And yes parts of songs were redone in the studio—this was after all a major motion picture, but watching the

songs you can't tell and you don't care. When it was released, *The Last Waltz* was hailed as the greatest concert film ever made. Almost 25 years later it still is.